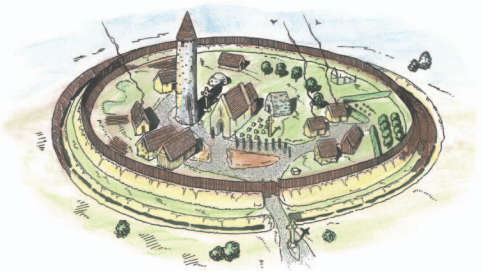
CHURCHES AND ABBEYS

HISTORIC SCOTLAND ALBA AOSMHOR

Christianity began to emerge as an important religion in Scotland from the 5th and 6th centuries AD. By the early 8th century, most of the population was Christian, although pagan traditions lingered for several centuries. The Church brought not only a new religion but also literacy and, in time, architecture in the form of buildings dedicated to Church business. The symbol of the cross was carved on gravestones from at least the 7th century onwards, and fragments of early Christian stonecarving are often clues to the location of vanished chapels and burial-grounds (see leaflet on Carved Stones).



The artist has given an impression of an early monastery within its earthwork enclosure. Perhaps about AD 1050, a small stone church has been built alongside the earlier oratory, and a stone tower acts both as belltower and as watch-tower. The monks sleep, eat and work in the various small buildings round about.

Early monasteries consisted of a cluster of small wooden or stone huts in which the monks slept and worked, and an oratory (tiny chapel). The monastery was often enclosed by a substantial ditch and bank, traces of which can be seen on aerial photographs and sometimes on the ground, and excavation may yield evidence of activities such as metalworking, leatherworking and crop-processing, which were vital to a self-sufficient monastic economy. Hermits who sought a life of solitary meditation inhabited remote islands, building small cells and oratories and carving simple stone crosses. Caves provided natural shelter for such hermits.

Early churches were small and simple rectangular buildings with an altar at the east end. They were built of timber, none of which survives above ground, but traces can be found by archaeological excavation. From the 8th century onwards, wooden churches might be replaced in stone or in stone and timber combined. The earliest churches still standing today, either as ruined shells or incorporated into later buildings, date from the 12th century, when the parish system was established, in which each church served a specific area. In some cases the design of the church reflects the separation of altar and clergy from the lay congregation. A small rectangular choir at the east end held the altar, while a larger rectangular nave provided space

The ruins of a medieval church and graveyard on the Isle of Lewis. © Crown Copyright: Historic Scotland, www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk

for lay people to stand and worship. Occasionally a wealthy patron might commission a more elaborate church, with a semi-circular apse at the east end and perhaps a square tower at the west. In the Northern Isles, steeple-kirks were a favoured design, with a round tower or even a pair of round towers at the west end.

After the 12th century, most rural parish churches were once again built as simple rectangular structures in which the difference between choir and nave was expressed by internal furnishings rather than by the structure itself. In the late middle ages some of the wealthier burgh churches were large and elaborate, with side aisles or chantry chapels where prayers were offered for the souls of their founders. As well as the parish churches, there were smaller chapels, especially in western Scotland, some of which were private family chapels.

The 12th century also saw a broader reorganisation of the Church into dioceses, each with its bishop and cathedral. Master-masons were responsible for the design of the more complex churches, and their expert services were required throughout Britain and Europe. Carved mouldings adorned doorways and windows, internal piers and arcades, and sometimes the work of individual masons can be identified by the distinctive letters or geometric 'signatures' (mason's marks) that they carved as a form of quality and quantity control.

Celtic monasticism had by now largely died out, and European orders

This was once a priory, but most of it has been reduced to foundations, apart from the church with its fine tower. © RCAHMS (John Dewar Collection) Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

of monks and nuns were gradually introduced: Benedictine, Cistercian, Augustinian and others. The architecture of these new abbeys and nunneries was far more sophisticated than the old Celtic foundations. Their buildings were arranged round a square cloister, with the church usually on the north side so as not to block sunlight from the open cloister. The whole complex might be enclosed by a precinct wall, as were cathedrals,

The fine chancel arch in the ruined Gullane Parish Church. The church was built in the 12th century and some Norman features still survive today.This arch would have been blocked up during later alterations. © Crown Copyright: Historic Scotland, www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk

This artist's reconstruction of a medieval abbey shows a typical layout of buildings around a cloister next to the great church. Land close to the abbey is enclosed by a precinct wall with a gateway, and there is a round dovecot and a covered well in the foreground.

and sometimes traces of gatehouses survive. Orchards, gardens, fishponds and dovecots provided a welcome source of fresh food.

By the mid 13th century there was a growing need for those who would preach in a lively way to lay folk and whose lifestyle embraced personal poverty, following the example of Christ and his disciples. This need was met by Dominican and Franciscan friars, and their friaries were often situated on the outskirts of towns. The initial role of many friars was to combat heresy, and preaching to urban populations was an important means of doing so.

Most great churches and cathedrals have been remodelled during medieval times, and they show different fashions in architecture, usually ideas imported from England or Europe. There was a period of renewed building and rebuilding in the 15th and early 16th centuries, including the creation of collegiate churches. These reflected the desire of major landowners to provide masses for the salvation of their souls, and colleges of priests were brought together for that purpose. In effect, collegiate colleges were enlarged versions of chantry chapels.

Abbeys and cathedrals underwent great change after the Reformation of the Church in 1560, but many of their churches continued in use to some extent until they were eventually replaced by new churches. The 18th and 19th centuries saw the construction of many new parish churches in the architectural styles of the day, particularly as towns and cities expanded. Family burial aisles were often added to the outside of churches or built free-standing in their kirkyards. The churches and graveyards of today are complex architectural and social documents. Many have histories going back to the 12th century, even though the church may have been demolished and rebuilt more than once and the graveyard reorganised.

Many churches have undergone one or more periods of rebuilding over the centuries. Even where there is no structural trace of earlier churches, re-used gravestones can be clues to their location. Here a medieval graveslab has been set into the wall of a later burial ground. *© Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk*

TIME-LINE

End of the last Ice Age	12,500	
Wildlife colonises land		
Mesolithic hunting settlers	8500	Flint scatters
		Shell mounds, rock shelters
Neolithic farming settlers	4000	Chambered tombs and houses
		Cupmarked rocks
	3000	Stone circles, henges, and standing stones
Metal technology (gold, copper)	2000	Burial mounds and short cists
		Hut-circles
Climate deteriorating	1000	Burnt mounds
Fortifications begin		Hillforts
Iron-working technology	500	Crannogs
	200	Duns, brochs, wheelhouses, and earth-houses
	BC ▲	
	▼ AD	
Roman army in Scotland	79	
		Roman camps, forts and roads, Antonine Wall
Waning of Roman influence	200	
	400	
Introduction of Christianity		Long cist graves
Picts, Gaels, Britons and Anglians	600	
Start of the Viking Age		Early Christian and Pictish carved stones, chapels
	800	
Emergence of Scottish nation		Pagan Viking graves and settlements
	1000	
	1100	
First burghs		Stone-built churches
	1200	
	1500	Mottes, abbeys, stone-built castles
Reformation of the Church		
	1600	
Agricultural improvements &		Tower-houses
Industrial Revolution	1800	Deserted villages and farms
	1900	Coal mines and heavy industries
Two World Wars		
	2000	Gun batteries and airfields

FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPH:
The great medieval abbeys of Scotland, such as Dundrennan, became sadly ruined after the Reformation. Their surviving remains illustrate fashions in architecture over the 12th to the 16th centuries, and excavation can reveal details of demolished buildings.
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http://data.historic-scotland.gov.uk

The following leaflets are available from Historic Scotland:

Scheduled ancient monuments: a guide for owners, occupiers and land managers

Managing Scotland's archaeological heritage

Grants for Ancient Monuments: a guide to grants available for the preservation, maintenance and management of ancient monuments

Archaeology on farm and croft (produced jointly with the Council for Archaeology Scotland)

Scotland's listed buildings: a guide for owners and occupiers

The carved stones of Scotland: a guide to helping in their protection

Metal detecting - yes or no? Metal detecting, scheduled ancient monuments and the law

A leaflet on *Treasure Trove in Scotland* is available from the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh

A number of *Historic Scotland Technical Advice Notes,* on topics such as the use of lime mortars, the conservation of thatching and stonecleaning, are available. Catalogue from and orders to:

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Tel: 0131 668 8638
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